

May I speak in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's always interesting to look back at the roots of present day customs.

In the UK harvest festival, is traditionally celebrated on the Sunday nearest to the **harvest moon**. This is the full Moon that occurs closest to the autumn equinox (22 or 23 September). Although today we can plan a fixed day for this celebration, in the past the harvest festival differed, based on when all the crops had been brought in.

Harvest celebrations pre-date Christianity, but it has always been seen as a very spiritual time to give thanks for the year's crop. Since Saxon times, **Symbolic corn dolls**, made out of the last sheath of the harvest, were placed on banquet tables when villages had their huge feasts. The doll was then kept until the spring to ensure the continuation of a good crop next year. Saxon farmers, believed the last sheath contained the spirit of the corn. They would sacrifice this corn along with a hare – normally one hiding in the crop - although later on, **model hares**, made out of straw instead. This then led to the making of corn dolls, which were hung up in farmhouses, and which were supposed to represent the goddess of the grain.

The word harvest normally makes us think of agriculture, but many harvest celebrations exist around the country that celebrate another type of reaping. There are about 24 festivals that give **thanks for the fishing seasons**. In October, in Billingsgate, London, there's the Harvest of the Sea Thanksgiving, where fish and netting decorate the church. Similar festivals arose in many fishing towns and villages, where the locals depend largely on fishing for a living. A tradition in North Shields, during the Blessing of the Salmon Fishery, is to give the first salmon catch to the vicar.

Lammas day was traditionally the day when freshly baked loaves were brought to church to be offered on the altar as a thanksgiving for the first fruits of the harvest.

The ancient Celtic world traditionally gave thanks as the harvest began to be brought in, and the first bread from, the first flour, from the first wheat was baked. The first day of August was the date of their festival, and the first Saxon Christians simply took it over and renamed it 'loaf mass', which in time became 'Lammas'. And Lammas was celebrated up to the Reformation and beyond, until the Industrial Revolution began to drive a wedge between people and the land and its ancient rhythms.

From the first harvest celebration, to the last – **St Michael's Mass**, on the 29th September, celebrates the end of the productive season. Also known as Michaelmas, it signifies a time when all the harvest should have been brought in. Its beginnings can be traced to the 5th century when the cult of St Michael spread to Western Christianity.

During the Middle Ages it was celebrated as a huge religious feast, and the harvest traditions grew from there. Fairs with market stalls and games, and the decoration of churches.

Against all of this background, Our modern-day celebration of Harvest Festival dates back to the 19th Century.

It all began in 1843, at Morwenstow in Cornwall, where the Rector, Robert Hawker, wanted to give thanks to God in a truly fitting way for providing the world's plenty.

'Parson Hawker', as he was known to his parishioners, was something of an eccentric, both in his clothes and his habits. He loved bright colours and it seems the only black things he wore were his socks. He built a small hut from driftwood on the cliffs overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, where he spent many hours writing his poems, smoking opium. He is known to have dressed up as a mermaid, and he excommunicated his cat for mousing on Sundays!

He dressed in a claret-coloured coat, blue fisherman's jersey, long sea-boots, a pink brimless hat and a poncho made from a yellow horse blanket, which he claimed was the ancient habit of St Padarn. He talked to birds, invited his nine cats into church and kept a huge pig as a pet.

However, it was in 1843 that he introduced the first modern Harvest Festival Service, inviting his parishioners to give thanks to God for a plentiful yield from the land. He moved the service from the traditional beginning of harvest, 1st August, to its end – 1st October, which is why Harvest Festival is now always at either the end of September or the beginning of October. From that remote Cornish parish, the custom rapidly spread until nearly every church of nearly every denomination in nearly every part of the country had to have its harvest festival. It was popularised by the writing of many of the familiar Victorian Harvest Hymns, some of which we have sung today.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to Robert Stephen Hawker. Thanksgiving, thanking, expressing our gratitude, making known our appreciation – these are activities which are central to our humanity, to being made in the image and likeness of God. When we thank someone for what he or she has said or done, we are affirming that person, and encouraging, strengthening and cheering him or her.

It was Isaak Walton who expressed the important truth about a mind predisposed to express thanks: *God has two dwellings: one in heaven and the other in a thankful heart.*

So the festival of Harvest Thanksgiving bids us to remember the blessings we have received and to give thanks to God who created this world in love – a world capable of giving every man, woman and child enough and to spare.

The sad reality that so many go hungry in a world of plenty is a reminder that the spirit of genuine gratitude is very close to the spirit of generosity, which St Paul writes about in the passage we heard from his letter to the Corinthians.

As the old Irish proverb puts it, 'When the hand ceases to scatter, the mouth ceases to praise.'

We can sometimes feel guilty about celebrating, when, looking around the world, we see that we have so much when others have so little.

The Festival of Harvest *Thanksgiving*, reminds us that as individuals and as a world community we need to work and work to bring greater justice and equity into our world.

In his letter to the Corinthians, St Paul shares his conviction that, if we learn to express the spirit of gratitude in our generosity, the rest will follow.

As Jesus reminds us in the parable of the farmer who needed to build bigger and bigger barns to store the grain he had grown, so that he could eat, drink and be merry – we gain nothing if we store up treasures for ourselves – it is when we share God's provision, that we find we are all blessed.

This service of Harvest Thanksgiving is taking place in the context of the Holy Communion. The alternative word often used for a service of Holy Communion – *Eucharist* – is simply an Anglicised version of the Greek for 'thanksgiving'.

Each and every time we gather to share bread and wine together, God bids us to come in a spirit of gratitude and generosity.

For when we come to the Holy Communion, we are not just here to receive: to receive grace and mercy and forgiveness and blessing.

We are also here to give: to give thanks and praise and love and service.

I end with a Christian Aid Harvest Prayer:

The earth is fruitful may we be generous.

The earth is fragile may we be gentle.

The earth is fractured may we be just.

Creator God,

harvest in us joy and generosity

as we together share in thanks and giving. Amen.